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## **Senate Republicans announce plans to strengthen Michigan's rural economy**

**LANSING** – Senate Republicans today continued their work to diversify Michigan's economy with a series of initiatives aimed at promoting economic growth in the state's rural areas.

“Across Michigan – in rural and urban areas alike – lack of jobs continues to be the number one issue facing our state. In fact, unemployment is higher in our rural counties than in other areas of the state,” said Sen. Gerald Van Woerkom, R-Norton Shores. “This package of bills is the first step in focusing the state's attention on the needs of rural Michigan.”

The proposal addresses three key areas vital to promoting rural economic growth:

- Helping rural residents through job-training and innovation;
- Developing a new rural economy and infrastructure; and
- Reducing the cost of doing business and protecting the environment.

Rural businesses have difficulty attracting and retaining qualified workers. Also, businesses wishing to expand in rural communities face challenges because those communities often lack needed infrastructure, including communication and other infrastructure. In addition, many businesses in rural areas rely on agricultural tourism, processing and production. These businesses are often inhibited by burdensome governmental rules and regulations.

The proposal would create the Rural Agricultural Recruitment Act to provide an incentive for trained workers to remain in rural areas. It also would create an agricultural processing apprenticeship program to increase the skilled labor available for the agricultural processing industry while providing young people in rural areas a different avenue for gaining practical work skills.

The plan also calls on the Michigan Broadband Development Authority to designate a minimum of \$1 million each year to rural, underserved areas through the seed capital loan program, double the amount designated to underserved areas in the authority's first two years of existence. It also would create a \$500 tax credit for landowners and companies for building cell phone towers in rural areas.

The proposal also would create a low-interest loan program for methane digesters and a property tax exemption for agricultural renewable energy systems. It also would create an agricultural tourism zoning commission within the Department of Agriculture and an agriculture and rural-communities advisory council in the Department of Environmental Quality to examine the effects of current regulations on farmers, food processors, agribusinesses and rural communities.

“When people talk about unemployment rates and the need for job providers, they too often think only of cities,” said Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema, R-Wyoming. “The unemployment rate in Michigan is too high for everyone. Rural areas are a great place to live and raise a family. With these initiatives, we’re looking to add ‘work’ to that list as well.”

The plan was unveiled today at a press conference in Hart. Legislation will be introduced in the coming weeks.

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